

Safety Appliances on the Railroads

L. S. Coffin

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

Coffin, L. S. "Safety Appliances on the Railroads." *The Annals of Iowa* 5 (1903), 561-582.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.2873>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)



Respectfully
L. S. Coffin

HON. LORENZO S. COFFIN.

Chaplain Thirty-second Iowa Infantry, 1862-63; Railroad Commissioner, 1883-88;
author of the Iowa law and the law of Congress providing for safety appliances
on the railroads; founder of "Hope Hall, No. 3," near Fort Dodge, Iowa,
a place of refuge for convicts released from our penitentiaries.

ANNALS OF IOWA.

VOL. V, No. 8.

DES MOINES, IOWA, JANUARY, 1903.

3D SERIES.

SAFETY APPLIANCES ON THE RAILROADS.*

BY HON. L. S. COFFIN.

During the two years previous to my appointment as a member of the Iowa Board of Railroad Commissioners, I had become quite interested in railroad men. In the extension of the Fort Dodge and Des Moines line to Ruthven, I was somewhat officially connected with the matter of securing the right of way, and I also had the selling of the lands that fell to the road. As a matter of course, I was often back and forth over the line, becoming well acquainted with the trainmen. It was in the year 1883 that I was appointed one of the Commissioners, and my duties led to a great deal of traveling over the State roads, where I was always on very friendly terms with the crews, learning much of their life and exposure. Much of my traveling was on freight trains, from choice, in order to learn what these men had to meet with. The Commissioner law required that in case of a serious accident on any of our roads, the Commission should carefully investigate the matter and report their findings to the Governor. It had not been the custom, nor the belief of the Commission that it was required of it, to investigate the maiming or the killing of a trainman. These cases were of such every day occurrence, it was taken as a matter of course that the men must of necessity be maimed and killed. In the annual report of the Commission previous to my going upon the Board, this was the idea set forth in speaking of

*If there seems to be any discrepancy in dates or names it must be attributed to failing memory, as I have written from memory alone.

L. S. C.

the fearful loss of life and limb to men in train service. After giving the number of fatal and serious accidents to railroad men on the roads of our own State, the report in substance says: "We regret exceedingly to be compelled to report year after year such great loss of life and so many terrible and painful accidents to these men, but we see no way to prevent it, and we suppose it is one of the inevitable conditions of a railroad man's life."

After being on this Board a year or more, and having familiarized myself with its duties and its opportunities to be of use to our people, I began to feel that I was not doing my duty as a sworn officer of the State, if I did not try in some way to lessen the great loss of life, and the suffering sustained by these railroad men, who were our fellow citizens, and whom I was equally sworn to serve. Their lives were just as dear to them and to their families as those of the passengers. If our law required us to investigate the maiming and killing of the passengers, who might or might not be citizens of Iowa, why should it not be our duty to look after the trainmen, who were citizens, and in a large sense, servants of the State—as much so as the members of the Railroad Commission? Our law required that every railroad company in Iowa should report promptly every accident, fatal or otherwise, to our State Railroad Commission. I soon became intensely interested in this matter, and I found myself going here and there to all parts of the State to investigate accidents to these railroad men. I learned that a great majority of the accidents came from coupling cars, but more of the fatal accidents from falling off from the trains. Then, I said to myself, "Why not have self-couplers, that will couple automatically when the cars are pushed together, and not require the men to go between the cars; and why not have air-brakes on freight as well as on passenger cars, under the control of the engineer, as on the passenger trains? We do not see men on top of the passenger cars setting up the brakes." It did seem to me that this could be done, and the

more I thought of it, and the more I investigated, the more satisfied I became that it was the very thing to do, and I said to myself, "It can and shall be done, if the public sentiment will stand by me in the matter."

My first work was to arouse the people to this awful wrong, the butchering of these faithful men who were serving the public at such a fearful risk to life and limb. To this end I used the public press and platform from one end of the country to the other. I prepared a letter, showing the terrible loss of life, and the maiming of these men, and sent it to every religious and family paper in the nation, and with it a personal letter to the editor, begging him either to give it room, or make it the subject of an editorial. I took one day over two thousand of these letters to our postoffice. I attended the National Conventions of Master Car Builders, a very important class of railroad officials, who meet annually to discuss all matters that go to the make-up of cars. I was very kindly received, and invited to address them on the subject of automatic couplers and power-brakes on freight cars. I also met with the Railroad Master Mechanics, where I was accorded a most kind reception. I met with these men in their annual conventions for five or six years, and found an increasing interest every year. In their convention of 1885, a joint committee was created, from the Master Car Builders' and Master Mechanics' Associations for the purpose of testing power-brakes on long freight trains. This committee was instructed to advertise to the world that any man who had invented a train-brake and wanted to sell the same to the railroads, might fit up a train of fifty freight cars with his appliance, and bring the train to Burlington, Iowa, where its merits would be tested by this committee of experts. If the invention stood the test, and should be found practical, the Master Car Builders would so report to the railroad companies, recommending the purchase of the invention. It was also stated that no railroad company would buy any brake that was not first

tested by this committee of expert officials, as the organization appointing it represented practically all the railroads of the United States and Canada. To this test all the Railroad Commissioners of the different states were invited. At that time, however, there were but few states that had railroad commissioner laws. These tests lasted some three weeks, and at the conclusion the committee had to report to their conventions (which convened that year in Minneapolis), that there was not a brake in existence that was safe and practical for a train of fifty cars. The brakes used on passenger trains would do very well for short trains of fifteen to twenty-five or thirty cars, but when applied to long trains of fifty or more cars, such as the larger engines coming into use could draw, the shocks when the brakes were applied in emergency cases would demolish the cars in the rear end of the train and play havoc with the freight inside.

There were but few of the Commissioners who came to witness these tests, and fewer still who stayed after they saw one test. It was very dangerous work. After the first two days, I was the only Commissioner left. It was a very dangerous place to be in, yet there was so much at stake that I felt that I must know all about it, so that I could talk intelligently on the matter as occasion might require. In my future work before legislative and congressional committees, I found the knowledge thus knocked into me of great service. I may be pardoned if I say right here, that in all my public addresses, before congressional committees, with old and experienced railroad men, presidents and general managers by the dozen to oppose, I was never once picked up for making a wrong statement. All seemed willing to admit that I knew what I was talking about. Mr. Arthur Mellen Wellington, one of the leading civil engineers of the nation, and then editor of *The Engineering News* of New York, was chosen umpire in these brake tests. In writing of them afterwards for his journal, he made this statement: "Several of the Railroad Commissioners were present the first two days

but they were all scared away except Commissioner Coffin of Iowa, who stayed through the entire tests of three weeks of each year, and always rode in the most dangerous part of the train in order that he might become conversant with every particular. As a result he knows as much about power-brakes and automatic couplers as the average general manager of our railroads. In fact, as I look back now upon those scenes and dangers I wonder that all came out alive. As it was, several of us were badly hurt for the time being."

These tests, as I have stated, were continued for three weeks in the summer of 1886, and when this committee of experts reported the utter failure of finding a practical brake, suitable and safe for long freight trains, the conventions continued the same committee, with instructions to advertise again, and repeat the tests in 1887. This was done, and I think there were six fifty-car trains brought that year, with about the same result as in '86.

If I repeat here a conversation I happened to overhear, it may throw a side-light on the way the railroad companies were feeling on this important question. While, perhaps, it savors a little of egotism, I may still be permitted to give it. Mr. Godfrey H. Rhodes, the master of motive power, and master car-builder for the Burlington road, was the chairman of this committee of experts. He is now Assistant General Superintendent of the lines west of the Missouri river. While conducting the tests he was asked by a prominent man why it was that the railroads were at such an expense in testing these brakes. Mr. Rhodes replied, "It is only a question of a short time when the public will demand that we equip all our cars with the best possible safety appliances, such as brakes and automatic couplers, for men like Mr. Coffin, one of the Commissioners of this State, are constantly writing and speaking before the public and arousing a sentiment that will result in a law making us do this work, and we want to know what it will be safe to buy." That remark, though not intended for my ears, shot a mighty ray of hope

into my heart, and I said to myself, "Well, then, I will keep on in the work of agitation until the sentiment is crystalized into law." Yet it was with sad and disheartened feelings that I listened to the report of this committee to their conventions which met this year at Old Point Comfort, Va. Still there seemed to be a ray of hope from one very important circumstance. Mr. George Westinghouse, the distinguished inventor of the air-brake in use on most of the railroads in both this and in foreign lands, came in his own private car to this second test in 1887. His general manager and leading men were there both years, with his brake on a fifty-car train, and while it was far ahead of all others, it was not up to the standard required by the committee. But Mr. Westinghouse intimated to the committee that the thing would yet be accomplished. He returned to Pittsburg, and wealthy man as he was, took off his coat and went to work in one of his great shops. He arranged fifty brakes in the shop, and experimented and worked on them for some three months. In September of that year I received an invitation to go to Burlington to witness the work of the "quick-acting brake" on a fifty-car train. I needed no second invitation but proceeded immediately to Burlington. The long hoped-for thing was accomplished. That immense train could be hurled down the steep grade into Burlington at the rate of forty miles an hour, and at a given signal, the brakes applied and the train brought to a standstill inside of 500 feet with scarcely a jar and not a man on top of the cars. "Eureka! Eureka!" I exclaimed, and actually wept for joy. "The thing can now be done!" I had gone through almost the same experience in the tests of couplers, for in witnessing them I felt just as sure that there was an automatic coupler that could take the place of the old man-killer link-and-pin-coupler, as I was sure that we now had a power-brake. I will not stop here to tell of the experimental trips with freight trains that I took with railroad officials across the State while testing close and loose couplers to ascertain whether an

engine would haul as many cars with the close as with the loose ones, like the old link-and-pin. It was proved to a demonstration that it would, and I was now ready to go to work for proper legislation. My first movement was to get a law through the Iowa legislature.

In the winter of 1889-90, I drafted the first bill that was ever enacted by our legislature for this purpose. I drew that bill with great care. I believe I was a full month at work upon it. I submitted every section as I drew it to one or more of the Judges of our Supreme Court, in order to be sure of its constitutionality, and when I finished it, I asked the representative from Hamilton county, Mr. Chase, to introduce it in the House,* which body passed it with only seven votes against it. Later, in the Senate, there was not a single opposition vote. The bill was at once approved by Governor Horace Boies, and I have the pen with which he signed it. The Nebraska legislature copied the bill, and I believe, passed it word for word. In the spring of 1888 the Interstate Commerce Commission, which had just come into being, invited all the State Commissioners to a conference at Washington, in order to get all possible information from their experience. Although my term of office had expired, and for some good reason I was not reappointed, I was invited to attend this conference. I there made a speech, at the request of the Conference, which started the ball a-rolling at a great rate. It is my opinion that there were at that time only seven or eight states which had a Commissioner law. There was not a single Commissioner who was not in a measure opposed to the legislation I had in view. They did not believe that the maiming and killing was as great as I had represented it. What had occurred in Iowa I knew to a dead certainty, for I had the report of the railroads themselves, but as to the nation, I had to get at the losses as best I could through estimates. There were no reliable statistics

*Journal of the Iowa House of Representatives, March 1, 1890, pp. 123, 326-7-8. Senate Journal, April 2, 1890, p. 492.

outside of Iowa. I took the number injured and killed in this state as a basis for these estimates. Poor's Manual gave me the number of miles of our railroads, together with the number in the country, and so, by the "rule of three," I figured the awful total of the whole, but this was so terribly great that I never dared to give out the actual figures. One day, however, in talking with a very intelligent railroad official, he said, "Mr. Coffin, your basis of calculation is wrong. You should not figure on the number of miles, but on the number of engines." I saw this in a moment, for on most of the roads, and especially in the east, there would be ten trains running to one in Iowa. Poor's Manual also gave me the number of engines in the nation, and when I took this for a basis I was thunderstruck at the fearful aggregate. I was more afraid than ever to give out the full figures.

I can hardly describe the scene in the conference room in Washington as I concluded my remarks. The Commissioners gathered around me, making loud protests and assuring me that I must be wrong. The Commissioners from Kentucky especially were very emphatic, protesting against allowing such figures to go out to the public. Even the Commissioners from Massachusetts seemed to be scandalized that such words and figures should go out from that body. It will be remembered that Massachusetts was the first state in the Union to adopt the Commissioner system. Her representatives at the conference had the honor of being considered the most efficient and able Board then in existence. Our own State and others had followed the precedent which she had inaugurated at the start. "But there," I said, "are the figures, and to me they are cold and awful facts, but I hope that when you meet here again in a year from now you will be able to show that I am wrong." I did meet with them the following year and here is what the Kentucky Commissioners' report, which was issued just before the meeting, says in substance: "We were horrified at the remarks of the gentleman from Iowa as to the number of casualties to railroad

employees as shown by the Iowa statistics and calculations from them, and we could not believe that it was possible they were true; so, on our return to our office from Washington we issued circulars to the roads in our state requesting that they would report to our Board the accidents to employees for that year, and we find to our great amazement and sorrow, that the basis of the Iowa calculation is far too low, for the casualties to trainmen in this state are larger than those shown by the Iowa reports."

At this conference a resolution was adopted favoring the enactment of a law by Congress requiring safety appliances on the cars. I had already prepared a bill myself, which Col. D. B. Henderson of Iowa introduced in the House, and Hon. William B. Allison in the Senate. The long fight now began. President Harrison in his message to Congress December, 1883, made a grand plea for some legislation for the safety of railroad men, and in that plea used in substance these remarkable words: "It is a disgrace to our civilization that men in honorable employment for a livelihood should be subjected to greater danger to life and limb than soldiers in time of actual war." He urged Congress to take some wise action on the matter. Not long after that first conference in Washington, the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the illustrious Judge Thomas M. Cooley of Michigan, wrote me, requesting all the facts and statistics that I had accumulated, with such other information as I had acquired, for the use of the Commission. Some two years afterwards I understood that on General Harrison's request for information as to the casualties to railroad men, these statistics were sent to him and became the basis of his remarks on that subject. These facts were furnished him by the Secretary of the Commission without any reference to the author. It might be well to note this fact as it has a bearing on a very important time in the history of this safety appliance legislation further on. I was in Washington during both sessions of the Fifty-first Congress, the first Con-

gress of the Harrison administration, and often before committees. The House Committee on Railroads and Canals at first decided to report the bill for passage by an almost unanimous vote, though not in a formal meeting of the committee, for it was impossible to get them together. This was accomplished, however, by getting the clerk of the committee to go to each member and obtain his written consent that the chairman report the bill back to the House recommending its passage. It was now so near the close of that Congress that I knew well enough there was no hope of getting it through the Senate if it passed the House; but I was very anxious to have it taken up and passed by the House, as the prestige of this success would be a great help to me in the next Congress. The chairman of the committee, Mr. H. C. McCormick, of Pennsylvania, stood on his feet directly in front of Speaker Reed, with that bill in his hand, all the night long, but failed to obtain recognition. I had gone personally to Mr. Reed, in the brief recess between the day and night sessions, and begged him to recognize Mr. McCormick, telling him that I had "counted noses" of the members of the House, and was sure that it would go through without a call of the House on a ye and nay vote, and would not take over five minutes. He would give me no satisfaction, only remarking that there was a great deal to do that night, but that he would see. He was, however, all along opposed to the bill, and did not vote for it two years later when it was finally passed by the House, and when, too, we needed every vote that we could command, as we shall see later on.

In the Senate the bill was referred to Senator Cullom's committee on Interstate Commerce. Senator Allison very kindly took me before the committee and introduced me, briefly speaking of my work and standing in Iowa, and of the importance of the measure. He was a strong, earnest friend of the measure from first to last. I was before that committee only a few times during the session, as my advisers,

who were favorable to the measure, thought it better to first get the bill through the House. But, as already intimated, there was no action in either body during that session. So, during the interim before the meeting of the next Congress, I devoted my time to arousing public sentiment in favor of some legislation for the safety of these railroad men. To this end I used the press, platform and pulpit. Wherever there were great official gatherings of the different denominations and religious bodies, I would try to get a hearing, which was never refused me except in a single instance, and then only because of a misapprehension of the object of my mission. I also went before such legislatures as were in session, and persuaded them to memorialize Congress in favor of some action in this direction. This I found had a very good effect. I went to the International Conventions of the Railroad Brotherhoods, which passed strong resolutions in favor of a law for the safety of their members. I afterwards found this action very helpful in my work.

When the next Congress met (Fifty-second, first session) Mr. Charles F. Crisp, of Georgia, was elected Speaker of the House. I had gone over my bills very carefully, and made them as nearly perfect as possible. And I may be permitted to say that as far as I know, no question has ever been raised as to the constitutionality of any of the points involved, thanks to my friends, the Judges of the Supreme Court of Iowa, and more especially to Judge Joseph R. Reed, of Council Bluffs, who was then on the bench. Senator Allison and Col. D. B. Henderson again introduced the bill in their respective Houses. In the House the bill was this time referred to the Committee on Interstate Commerce, with Mr. George P. Wise, of Virginia, as its chairman. This was a very large and able committee, and before it we had several hearings. A large number of the highest railroad officials, presidents, general managers and master mechanics attending, all of whom were opposed to the passage of the measure. Nearly or quite all the southern roads were very bitterly hos-

tile to it, openly asserting that they would defeat the bill if it cost them thousands of dollars to do it. While most of these gentlemen admitted that automatic couplers were desirable, and they must come into use as fast as they were able to procure them, still they were opposed to any legislation on the subject. This also was the attitude of most of the leading roads of the north. There were, however, some very signal exceptions to this policy of delay. The Vanderbilt roads never opposed me in the least, but on the other hand privately encouraged me to keep at the work as they felt it was a measure that all of the roads in the end would adopt. Here is a pertinent illustration of the way these corporations feel about any legislation whenever legislation will result in good to themselves. That great railroad man, Mr. Roberts, the long-time President of the Pennsylvania system, came before Senator Cullom's committee. He said that the Pennsylvania road believed in all the provisions of this bill, and were putting on these automatic couplers and brakes as rapidly as possible. He confidently stated that his Company "would get there" before the dates that Mr. Coffin had fixed in his bill. But he did not want any legislation on the matter. "We railroad men," he said, "know what we want and what we ought to have for the safety of our men as well and much better than anybody else. We shall provide these things just as fast as we are convinced that we need them, and they are to be had, and so, gentlemen, do not burden us down with this proposed legislation." So convincing was his talk that Senator Harris, of Tennessee, who was a member of the committee, remarked, "Well, I have heard enough and am satisfied that the railroad people know what they want." On that he got up from the table around which the committee were sitting, and took his hat to leave the room, when Senator Cullom asked him if he had not better hear the other side before he made up his mind. "No," said he, "I have heard enough. I guess that these railroad men of long experience know what they are about, and what they

want." And yet this man was the honored president *pro tem* of the United States Senate! And now let me state the sequel to Mr. Roberts' assertion that his "road would get there before the date fixed in the bill."

At a hearing before the Interstate Commerce Commission five years after the bill became a law, for an extension of time to meet its requirements, the officials of this same great and rich road pleaded for five more years in which to comply with the law! They reported that only about one-half of their cars had been equipped as the law required. Their plea was that they could not do this work on account of hard times. Poverty was at this time their only plea for delay. The first road on the petition for an extension of time was the Chicago & Alton, and that road from 1888 to 1898 was paying its regular 8 per cent dividend, without a single omission. These two cases give us a lesson that should not be forgotten. Right here, too, is another point of much importance which became a great help to me in this last Congress. Many leading roads of the north saw that sooner or later a law would be enacted requiring this humane protection to their men, and had commenced in earnest to get ready for it, adding many of these safety appliances to their cars; but as these roads were obliged to take the unequipped cars from other lines, the work was still dangerous for their men, notwithstanding they had laid out large sums of money for these safety appliances. This resulted in a great injustice to the humane and progressive roads. Publication of these facts became a great advantage in our ultimate success.

After several hearings before the House Interstate Commerce Committee, of which George D. Wise, of Virginia, was chairman, the bill was referred to a sub-committee of three, of which Mr. J. J. O'Neill, of St. Louis, was chairman, and there the bill slept for months. The other two members of the sub-committee were very favorably disposed towards the bill, and were ready at all times to act upon it,

but the chairman would do nothing, and for reasons that he would not explain, though claiming still to be in favor of the bill. This was all finally explained. That fall the Democratic National Convention was held in Chicago, and Mr. O'Neill went to that city and managed to get a resolution adopted by the convention, berating the Republicans for not enacting this same law in the former session of Congress. A resolution favoring this legislation was adopted as a plank in the Democratic platform. When he returned, he and the Secretary of the Interstate Commerce Commission Committee fixed up the bill to suit themselves without consulting me, or even letting me know when the sub-committee or the full committee met. A great many of the members of the House were ready and anxious to vote in favor of the bill, and wanted it reported. I had worked with almost every member of the House, and I knew that the bill would pass with but little opposition if it could be reported back to that body. At last when these men had fixed this bill to suit themselves, it was reported to the full committee, and that committee supposing that it was my bill, at once voted to report it for passage, and it was so reported, and passed the House (July 8, 1892) with very little opposition. It was at once sent over to the Senate. I have to confess that I myself was in blissful ignorance of the changes that Mr. O'Neill and his co-worker had made in the bill, thinking that they were friendly to the measure in its main intents and purpose. I was completely thrown off my guard until one day in the office of the Secretary of the Interstate Commerce Commission I met Mr. O'Neill. He said, "Mr. Coffin there is no need of your staying here any longer. We will now look after the bill, and see that it passes the Senate, and you had better go home. You do not know how to handle these Senators as well as we do, and you may endanger the bill by some indiscretion." Of course I was thunderstruck, and for a time did not know what to say. In fact, I think that I made but little reply, only to give him to understand that I

should stay by to the end, and it will appear that it was well that I did so.

In the Senate the bill was referred to Senator Cullom's Committee on Interstate Commerce, and in due time the Senator called the committee together. In the meantime, he looked over the bill very carefully, and said to me that he was very doubtful about its passing his committee, as it had been changed some from the one I had had before them. Of course, this was enough to make me very anxious. I had secured pledges enough from the Senate to insure its passage, if I could once get it out of the committee with a favorable report. But here I was after four years of hard work liable to have it all come to naught. There were only three weeks more before the Fifty-second Congress would close and there was a great amount of business before it, as is always the case so near its final adjournment. The time for the meeting of the committee came, and Mr. Cullom kindly invited me to step into his private room while it was in session. The session was a very short one. At its close the Senator came into the room and threw the bill down upon the desk where I was writing, saying, "There is your bill. I read it very carefully to the committee. A few words were said on it by one or two, and then some one moved that we report against it, or for an indefinite postponement, and it was so voted. Now," said he, "if you will take the bill and so remodel it as to conform to the one you had presented by Senator Allison, I will call the committee together again, and see what I can do, for I believe that something of this kind should be a law." The mighty weight of that moment I can never tell in words. For an hour I sat there stunned. The first thought was to throw up the sponge and quit, but after a few minutes deliberation, I said, "No. There is yet hope. This is a great humane work and God is behind it, and it must and will go through." I took the bill and went to my room and for two days and nights I worked incessantly upon it, and then handed it to Senator Cullom for criticism. He made

scarcely a change. "Now," said he, "I will call my committee together and see what we can do." After the bill was discussed for some three hours, the committee voted that the chairman might report the bill, recommending its passage, but that they would not agree to support the measure on the floor of the Senate. Then, again, I was happy, for I was well assured that it had friends enough in that body to pass it if once it could come up in the regular order, which was now assured. But after all there was a hard fight for its life. It came up as the regular order of business on a Monday morning (February 6, 1893), and it continued to be the regular order for all that week. It was fought section by section, and finally came to a vote at five o'clock Saturday afternoon (February 11). There were only ten votes against it. Senator I. G. Harris, of Tennessee, and Arthur R. Gorman, of Maryland, were leaders in the opposition. A motion was made in the Senate to strike out all of the House bill and adopt the committee's amendment of the whole bill. I have before me the bill as it passed the Senate. A black line runs through every line of every section of the old House bill, and then follows the bill as it passed the Senate with some minor amendments, precisely as I had drafted it. It went from there to the Speaker's desk in the House. As it was now an amended House bill, it had to take its chances before that body again. The long fight over the bill in the Senate had, of course, called a great deal of public attention to it by this time, and more especially that of the railroads. As stated before, the southern roads were unanimously opposed to it. Somehow it had gone out as the saying of one of the opposition, either in or out of Congress, I am not able to say which—"that niggers were cheaper than automatic couplers and power-brakes,"—but this did not help the cause of the opposition. It was used against the roads with great effect. It was too cold blooded and heartless. The day at last came when the bill was taken from the Speaker's table. On February 21, 1893, it was made a special order, and the

race for its life began. Mr. James D. Richardson, of Tennessee, was the leader of the opposition. Mr. Wise, of Virginia, Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Committee, to which the bill had been sent first, though a southern man, took charge of the bill and made a grand fight for it. Of course there was close at hand a powerful lobby which fought the bill inch by inch. That Congressional day, February 21st, was a long one, longer than any other day of the Fifty-second Congress. It lasted until 6:30 the next morning, the 22d. The opposition resorted to filibustering and tried in every possible way to adjourn without action on the bill. Had this occurred the bill would then have gone to the bottom of the calendar, and could not have been reached again during that Congress, which was then only about a week from the final adjournment. But our men stayed with us to the end. So many members had gone that whenever a motion was made to vote or to have a call of the roll there would arise the cry of "No quorum." This was followed by a motion to adjourn, but we always had enough friends on hand to defeat the motion. It was a very stormy night, and the sergeant-at-arms had a hard time, running all over the city of Washington to hunt up members and bring them to the House. About five o'clock in the morning Speaker Crisp came down on to the floor of the House and had a consultation with the leaders of the measure, agreeing to recognize Mr. Wise, who had charge of the bill, on suspension day, if he would consent to an adjournment. On that day, when the rule is suspended, whatever bill is then before the House can at once be put upon its passage with only one filibustering motion allowed. But here comes the rub. It must then be passed by a two-thirds majority. Here now was another crisis. Did we have that two-thirds? I knew that we had a large majority, but it was a little uncertain whether we could command two-thirds of the members. After consultation, however, it was thought safe to risk it, and the House adjourned.

It was then only three days to suspension day. I had taken a violent cold that stormy night, and the nervous strain had nearly worn me out. I was bordering closely on pneumonia. Still there was a great deal to be done before that trial day. The enemies of the bill had induced employees of the different roads in the south to send in telegrams to their members, asking them to oppose the bill, which they, as practical railroad men in actual service, did not want. These telegrams had been read on the floor of the House the day the bill first came up and were having the desired effect. But this delay in the consideration of the bill for three days gave me time to counteract their influence. I had before the committees resolutions adopted by all the Brotherhoods of Railroad Employees, putting themselves unanimously on record in favor of the bill. These Brotherhoods contained over one hundred thousand practical men who were running trains. Besides these, I had handed the committees petitions signed by thousands of the men asking for this legislation. All these and many other facts pertinent to the matter I gathered up and condensed into a small pamphlet which I had printed. When the bill came up for its final disposition, February 27th, I had placed on each member's desk a copy of this pamphlet. It was worth a year's hard work to hear the speech by Mr. Wise in closing the debate on the question of its passage. He was a tall man, with long arms, and quite nervous in his manner. He pointed out that these bogus telegrams all read as though dictated by one master mind, and holding up the little pamphlet high over his head and nervously shaking it, said in stentorian voice, "Here are over a hundred thousand practical railroad men at work on the railroads of this nation exposed at this very moment, as President Harrison has said, 'to greater danger to life and limb than were our soldiers in the civil war.' They are asking you to throw some protection around their occupation, while they are serving in their quasi-public capacity, as no other class of wage-earners ever do. Shall we listen to a

score or more of private telegrams, which show on their face that they are frauds, and ignore the official utterances of these great Brotherhoods, speaking in no uncertain terms of their great need?" The picture of that grand man standing there with that book quivering in his nervous hand high above his head, will never be banished from my memory. Something of a like scene occurred on the day of the all night session, when some one asked him how long he would delay the important business of Congress, now so near its close, on such a bill as this? Rising in his place to his full height, and quivering with hot indignation that such a question should be asked by any one on that floor, he looked straight at the man who had asked it, and with southern fire flashing from his eyes, replied, "Sir, I will stand here till eternity comes before I will turn my back on these deserving men, and on such a bill as this." For a moment the House was as silent as death, and then such a roar of applause broke forth as is seldom heard in that body. That noble man is now, I understand, dead. If he were living, I should esteem it a great pleasure to go all the way to his home and thank him over again for his grand help in the work.

At the close of Mr. Wise's great speech the yeas and nays were called. There was an almost breathless silence during that roll call. Col. D. B. Henderson, then a member of the House, who had from the very first stood like a rock for the bill, and done it much eminent service, understanding that Tom Reed was not to vote for the bill, went to him, and with some very forcible words, which he knew so well how to use, persuaded him to leave the House so as not to be put on record against the bill. The vote was very close. There were only five votes over a two-thirds majority. Every one of the Iowa delegation voted for the bill except Judge Walter I. Hayes. He voted against it. What was the result to him? He had been elected by over seven thousand majority in his district, as I remember it, but the railroad

employees of his district combined, and irrespective of party, overcame that large majority, and left the Judge out in the cold. Thanks to the sense of the Fifty-second Congress, the bill was passed at last, and on the day before President Harrison laid aside his authority, he gave it his approval. It was now a bill no longer, but a solemn law of a great nation. I doubt if Mr. Harrison ever signed a bill with as much willingness as he did that. If I am rightly informed, he said that very thing. I can leave it to the judgment of the reader to determine what would have been the result if I had taken Mr. O'Neill's advice and left Washington for my home. The pen with which the President signed the bill had been spoken for by the Secretary of the Interstate Commerce Commission—so Maj. Halford, the private secretary of the President told me—and I suppose he has it now. I understand that the legislature of Massachusetts passed a vote of thanks to this Secretary for getting the coupler bill through Congress! It matters little by whose work the grand result was brought about. The saving of life and limb by this law is something stupendous, and must be a source of great satisfaction to every person who had anything to do with its enactment. In the year after President Harrison's approval of the measure there were 2,837 railroad men killed, and between 20,000 and 30,000 injured. Four years later there were only 1,693 killed, making a saving of 1,044 lives, and there were about 5,000 fewer men injured by accidents. The roads had not then quite half equipped their cars as the law required. Now, at the time I am writing (1902), all the cars and trains are fully equipped with these life-saving appliances, reducing the loss of life and limb from what it was at the time the bill became a law, by sixty-four per cent, according to the last report, and there are a great many more men employed on the railroads now than ever before.

Without carrying this history of the safety appliance law further I want to emphasize one very important point. No matter who may claim to be the originator of such a law, one

thing is certain, that the bill drafted by me and which became our Iowa law was the first of its kind on our statute book, and I believe that all intelligent, honest men will be willing also to admit that no one had preceded me in the general agitation of this matter. Then, it is, I think, generally known and admitted that the first bill ever presented in either body of Congress was drafted by myself. This fact will be attested both by Senator Allison and Speaker Henderson. So, when I claim that I was the chief actor in this movement, I do not step so far aside from becoming modesty as to come into the realm of offensive egotism. It was not in the power of any one man, single-handed and alone, to inaugurate and bring to a successful conclusion a movement like this which cost the railroad corporations not less than one hundred million dollars—I say it was not in the possibility of any one man to do this with all the combined forces of the railroads against him. And more especially would this be impossible when such a gigantic work was undertaken by a man like myself, a humble, obscure farmer, with little or no education or reputation to give him prestige. It was God behind the movement that insured its success. I was used by Him as the instrument to work out a mighty good to the children of men. I have never at any time been able to think that I alone have done anything. This feeling was so dominant in me, that when I came home from Washington after the bill became a law, and the ladies of the Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, who had named their lodge after me, gave me a reception and invited some of our most eloquent speakers to make addresses, I sat there and listened to their very able speeches, but could not make it seem that they were talking about me, or of anything I had done. God gave to me a great love and respect for this large and deserving class of wage earners, the railroad employees. To them I have given the best years of my life, and no class of men deserve it more, and no class appreciates more a kindly act in their behalf. Where-

ever a locomotive whistle is heard, wherever a freight car wheel turns, there I have a friend. But this friendship is not confined alone to the men on the trains. In every home to which these men return when they come in from their runs, a "God bless Father Coffin" springs to the lips of mother, wife and daughter, that son, father and brother can now more surely come home alive and unharmed. Whether or not it was L. S. Coffin that God used to bring this great blessing to these men, that is the way the boys of the railroad feel, and I am a thousand times more than satisfied, and will give to the loving Father grateful praise. For twelve years they have honored me with the Presidency of the Railroad Employes' Home, a home for aged and disabled railroad men, for the present located at Highland Park, Ill. This Home is destined in time to grow into a great institution, and be cared for and managed by the great Railroad Men's Brotherhoods of America and Canada.

WILLOW EDGE FARM, near Ft. Dodge, Ia., Dec. 15, 1902.

IT CAN no longer be doubted that a railroad will approach our eastern border, within a very short time,—say two years at the outside. Either at Galena or Savanna, within two years we shall hear the whistle of the iron horse. The completion of that road, to either of these places will, in a measure revolutionize the trade of the country bordering on the Mississippi, above Davenport, and on no part of that country will the change be more sensibly felt than in Jackson county. Situated as we are, directly opposite the terminus, no matter at which place it comes, the effect on the interests of the county will be most important. The direction of our trade will be from south to east. That is, our produce will go east to find a market and from the east shall we receive our merchandize.—*Bellevue Democrat*, Oct. 29, 1851.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.